

SPORTS

Big Ben comes through like clockwork

WP: QB's maturation, heady play why Steelers advance to Super Bowl



— Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger celebrates after a touchdown run. Roethlisberger's maturation has been the key to Pittsburgh's Super Bowl berth, writes Washington Post columnist Michael Wilbon.

Gary Cameron / Reuters

Jan. 22, 2006, 11:37 PM EST

By Michael Wilbon

Ben Roethlisberger woke up earlier than usual. Maybe it was the transition from Eastern to Mountain time. Perhaps it was simply the sense of anticipation of playing such an enormous game in the same city in which his idol, John Elway, worked his magic for so many years. After all, Roethlisberger wears No. 7 because Elway wore No. 7. Whatever it was, Roethlisberger was in a contemplative mood as he walked to the little lake behind the hotel the Steelers were staying in. "The lake was right there, the mountains were behind me," he said. "I thought, 'Man, Colorado is beautiful. I could live here.' "



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Roethlisberger went out and played like he was at home – like Elway – against Elway's old team in Sunday's AFC Championship game. The Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback found seven different receivers, completed 21 of 29 passes for 275 yards, and finished with an absurdly efficient passer rating of 124.9. He helped the Steelers convert eight of the team's first nine third-down plays and controlled the game the way Elway – or for that matter, Pittsburgh's Terry Bradshaw – once did.

There are still times in pro football when what the quarterback does is the story of the game. And although, as Broncos Coach Mike Shanahan said afterward, "I think we got beat in all areas today," the difference between Roethlisberger and Denver's Jake Plummer pretty much tells the story of the Steelers' 34-17 victory.

Roethlisberger, still only 23 years old, played like the best quarterback in the NFL this side of Tom Brady. The kid may not be the purest passer -- though he's plenty proficient at that -- but after two seasons he has mastered many elements of playing quarterback, despite saying emphatically after the game, "I'm a long way from mastering anything."

What he has mastered in these playoffs was not turning over the football. So far, he has thrown seven touchdown passes to one measly interception in the postseason, that one last week while he was being tackled by the Colts' Dwight Freeney. Roethlisberger's decision making, in just two seasons, has become Brady-like.

Meanwhile, those of us who have been waiting all season for Plummer to implode, to return to his old Arizona form, watched him give a vintage Jake performance, circa the 1990s. He threw two interceptions, fumbled twice, was sacked three times, and curiously sauntered into and out of huddles with his team down by two and three scores in the fourth quarter.

Other than one impressive touchdown drive in which he escaped at least two sacks and threw a number of pinpoint passes, Plummer played as if he had the Cardinals' logo, not the Broncos', on

the sides of his helmet. It wasn't the worst you've ever seen from Plummer, but four turnovers, 223 yards passing and fourth-quarter strolls in the park weren't going to get it done.

While he didn't publicly rip Plummer, Denver Coach Mike Shanahan had every right to. "Any time you have four turnovers," he said, "it's hard to win football games." And Plummer, to his credit, apologized for making poor decisions on the interceptions, one after a 47-yard kick return had juiced up Invesco Field.

"In a game like this," Plummer said, "you can't do that."

It was the Broncos' worst-case scenario, falling behind and having to turn the ball over to a quarterback as historically erratic as Plummer. In the regular season, Shanahan was able to coach him up and get him to play stunningly efficient, interception-free football. But sooner or later, as defensive players around the league would erroneously predict each week, it seemed he was bound to turn into, well, Jake Plummer.

This time, he did.

It was so much easier for Roethlisberger, who came to Pittsburgh as a kid the coaches simply hoped would not mess up a team that already had a fine defense, a variety of running backs, and a rather conservative passing game that is rarely called upon to win games.

Congratulated after the game, Roethlisberger said: "Whoa there. I never feel like I've won the game. I can lose it, but I don't win it."

Still, he so frequently burned Denver for blitzing in the first quarter that the Broncos quit blitzing him. He picked on rookie cornerback Domonique Foxworth (Cedrick Wilson had five catches for 92 yards and a touchdown) and stayed away from Champ Bailey. Afterward, Roethlisberger rolled his eyes at the thought of an across-his-body pass while on the run that he "floated" over two defenders (one of whom he says he didn't even see) to Hines Ward for a touchdown, and an early pass he threw that Bailey nearly intercepted. "I'm lucky I wasn't chasing [Bailey] the other way," Roethlisberger said.

Still, it's just not possible anymore to justify drafting Eli Manning (first) and Philip Rivers (fourth) ahead of Roethlisberger (11th) almost two years ago. True enough, as Roethlisberger often says, the Steelers coaches don't ask him to throw as often as other teams. But a bigger part is that Roethlisberger, we can now see, has been a quicker study. Manning, who is also with a veteran team, won three road games this season. Roethlisberger has won three in these playoffs.

Of course, a year ago, Roethlisberger threw three interceptions in the AFC championship game loss to the Patriots. That day he deserved every bit of blame he could absorb, but he also begged Jerome Bettis to come back for one more season so that he could help get Bettis home for the Super Bowl. "I'm glad I could deliver on that promise," he said, seeming to choke up as he said the words.

Roethlisberger talked openly about hitting a rookie wall last season, about being tired, about not being attentive enough in meetings, things he has reversed this year. "It's day and night, not even close," he said. "I feel so much better about everything than last year."

So now, while Shanahan goes back to the drawing board with Plummer and an offense that needs a talent upgrade at wide receiver, the Steelers go to the Super Bowl having won three straight on the road, with a team playing beautifully, with a young quarterback on the verge of stardom he doesn't want. With one more game left in his career, Bettis has to hand off the baton, and Big Ben is the one he'll hand it to.

It's perhaps the most fascinating thing in football, watching the maturation of a quarterback, the evolution from young and talented to driving a team toward a championship, which is where Roethlisberger is right now.

Michael Wilbon
